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ABSTRACT

The abandonment of face-to-face voice conversations in favor of the use of electronic conversations in composition classes is an issue to be interrogated. In a recent push to "prepare students for the 21st century," teachers are asked to teach computer applications in the humanities--and composition teachers, who will teach writing in computer labs using, among other techniques, electronic classroom conversations, are being recruited. Enthusiasts claim that this will ensure more student and less teacher participation and overcome hierarchies based on sex, race, class, attractiveness, personal charm, or status, leading to more equalization of power. But should voice conversation, face-to-face talk, be uncritically abandoned? Voice conversation can aid the development of writing by emphasizing what is missing in writing, what must be made up for, and what contextual clues, elaborations, and tones have to be inserted to guide readers. Voice conversation in the classroom also helps develop the kinds of oral practice that are part of writing in the academy as well as in the outside world. An important forum for both invention and feedback may be lost when students are required to write their conversation. Replacing voice with electronic conversations in the classroom may put too much emphasis on the "how" of writing rather than the "why" of writing and class rapport may not be established via computer because too few facets of personality get translated electronically. (Contains 8 references.) (CR)

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WRITING AS INVOLVEMENT: A CASE FOR FACE-TO-FACE CLASSROOM TALK IN A COMPUTER AGE

By Anne G. Berggren

ED 402 591

I'm told there are two kinds of computer users: those who see computers as a game and who fiddle around with applications because they are there; and those who see computers as a tool and will only learn applications of immediate use. Since I am the latter variety, I won't rave about how my computer has transformed my drafting and revising processes, linked me with my colleagues over E-mail, allowed me to rifle through library holdings online, and given me access to manuscripts and course materials at various web sites. Nor will I mention the practicality of online instruction for students in remote or widely separated locations, or the usefulness of electronic conferencing before class by students in that class.

The issue I mean to interrogate here is the use of electronic conversations instead of face-to-face--and here I'm coining a new phrase--**voice conversations** during class time in composition classes. As a teacher, I hesitate to abandon *good* classroom talk--conversations that, like good dinner-table conversations, are wide-ranging, personal, involved, animated, fast, and stimulating. Much of my time outside of class is spent alone, reading and writing, and when I'm in class, I crave voice contact, out-loud talk, gesturing, a chance to hear ideas and try out my own, the warmth of real human contact.

And yet, my department has recently begun a push to "prepare students for the 21st century" both by asking teachers to teach

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computer applications in the humanities and by actively recruiting composition teachers who will teach writing in computer labs, using, among other techniques, electronic classroom conversations. Enthusiasts claim that such electronic conversations ensure that students participate more and teachers less, that students take more turns, and that hierarchies based on sex, race, class, attractiveness, personal charm, or status can be overcome, thus leading to more equalization of power (e.g., Butler). Such enthusiasts also claim--as I myself have done--that "we learn to write by writing" and they have the transcripts to prove that students have written. Still, I wonder: should we uncritically abandon voice conversation, face-to-face talk, to teach writing only by having students write?

I want to interrogate electronic classroom conversations with three questions. First, does a focus on the production of electronic text put too much emphasis on the text and textuality? Interest in the text as apart from the world, a legacy from New Criticism, has, as Jane Tompkins points out in an essay on the history of readers, not disappeared. In literature classes, and in writing classes, we spend a great deal of time interpreting texts, deconstructing texts, using texts to produce other texts. In literacy studies, this emphasis on texts takes the form of what Deborah Brandt, in *Literacy as Involvement*, calls the "strong-text account": a view that sees writing as abstract, decontextualized, and anti-social. To theorists such as Walter Ong and David R. Olson, writing is metalinguistic--almost akin to pure thought. They see oral cultures as less abstract, more rooted in concrete, everyday problems, less capable of sustaining the complex mental efforts that produce critical and theoretical thought. Other

theorists--Brandt, Anne Ruggles Gere in her book *Writing Groups*, and Deborah Keller-Cohen in her introduction to *Literacy: Interdisciplinary Conversations*, for instance--define literacy more broadly as involving speaking, reading, and writing in a set of social practices that are culture-specific and can only be learned through everyday interactions with "real" people who are actively involved in these practices. Brandt thus defines writing as a meta-communicative, rather than a metalinguistic, act: it is always a person (writer) speaking to a person (reader) under particular circumstances (context). In order to transact business with the reader, the writer has to embed in the writing the specific context, substituting writing conventions and other clues for gestures and intonations that would be available to listeners in a face-to-face conversation. In this case, voice conversation may further the development of writing by emphasizing what is **missing** in writing, what must be made up for, what contextual clues, elaborations, and tones have to be inserted to guide readers.

Voice conversation in the classroom also helps students develop the kinds of oral practices that are part of writing in the academy as well as in the outside world: explaining your point of view, questioning others about what they mean, employing rhetorical strategies, practicing for oral presentations, performing as thinkers and actors in the world. To disregard these oral practices may deprive students of a chance to develop power in forms of discourse that are thoroughly intertwined with writing. As Brandt points out, writing as part of a community and reading the work of that

community requires that one already have a place--already have power--in that community.

My second question has to do with the writing process. Do writers lose an important forum for both invention and feedback when they are required to write their conversation? Process writing models envision texts as always in process--until they are due or abandoned. During the writing process, the **intent** of the writer matters more than the form of the writing, which may change. Talk holds the writing in abeyance over a period of time while writers clarify their own thinking and desires and consider how to couch the writing that will carry their meaning. Since students are usually more fluent speakers than writers, they can often get emergent, partly-formed thoughts out into the open in speaking that they may not be able to express in writing. If they must write the thoughts, they are limited by what they are able to--as we say--**"reduce"** to writing. What they can say is limited by the written language conventions available to them at the moment.

When I read transcripts of electronic conversations, in the work of Wayne Butler and Lester Faigley, for instance, I am struck by the way the conversation stays on the surface--students make generalities but don't bring up personal circumstances--their own stories--that show why they are making the generalities. They often respond only to disagree or agree with other students, rather than to advance new possibilities. Sometimes they throw in comments--such as "I sure could go for a sandwich right now"--that derail the conversation because they are easy to respond to. Because of the

time gap between comments on the same issue, communicative problems can't be immediately straightened out and the context of remarks gets distorted. The kind of in-depth consideration required for creative invention never takes place. [It's my impression from reading transcripts that more in-depth conversations take place during electronic conferencing between classes, where students have more time to compose their responses. See, for instance, Cooper and Selfe.]

As for getting feedback from readers, there is something about physical embodiment and face-to-face confrontation that makes people responsible for their views. Computer-mediated discussion allows respondents to be cool and distanced in their comments. By computer, I wouldn't be able to put the members of my own writing group on the spot, to see what they hate, to ask picky questions. I hesitate to ask students to type their feedback when I demand mine in person.

My third question has to do with purpose. Does replacing voice with electronic conversations in the classroom put too much emphasis on the **how** of writing rather than the **why** of writing? M. Jimmie Killingsworth, in a 1993 essay in *CCC*, notes that process writing and the idea of classroom conversation grew out of the 1960's frustration with bureaucratic and institutional structures that kept people isolated from each other. The Civil Rights Movement, consciousness-raising groups, and interactive and collaborative teaching and learning situations brought people together in ways that were meaningful to them, that fought against individual

alienation and meaningless tasks. Today, those bureaucratic and institutional forces are still with us. By demanding a certain amount of intimacy, by emphasizing intellectually-rigorous attention to other students' views and stories, face-to-face classroom talk in small writing classes can create meaningful communities. Students may already have social communities in which they feel at home, but I think they rarely have intellectual communities. Provided with such an intellectual community, students may see a **reason** to write, may be reminded of the human need to make meaningful statements. Rather than seeing writing as reporting, or as filling in a rhetorical form, the students may come to see writing as something that matters because they matter and their thoughts are interesting and important. I question whether a class can "jell" or establish rapport via computer, because too few facets of personality get translated electronically.

Researchers who teach in electronic classrooms are, of course, engaged in rigorous discussion over their practices and about theoretical issues such as how the acts of reading and writing change between print embodiments and screen embodiments. Researchers in more traditional classrooms are considering ways of disrupting those discourse conventions--such as the initiation/response/ evaluation pattern and the habit of teacher appropriation of student answers to weave a teacher interpretation that is imposed upon students--that lead to **poor** conversation that is not useful to students and don't involve them in active learning. I hope my

questions will prompt discussion both among both groups and between them.

Brandt characterizes writing and reading as "pure acts of human involvement" (6). When I was writing this paper, I thought of myself as speaking to you--not as implied readers, not as ideal readers, not even as "a fiction"--but as real people, taking part in the conversation vital to our shared community. I'm glad we are all embodied here. I want to hear your voices.

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